

Social Media and Stunted Social Growth: The Effects of Social Media on Interaction

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the idea that social media is harming society's ability to interact in-person, and that such a problem can and should be addressed. With social media growing at an increasing rate, the human race is becoming saturated with this "social" technology. The author of this paper questions just how social the Internet is making humanity. The target audience is the shy and reclusive Internet users who struggle to interact in real-life, but the essay is also aimed at those who use social media excessively. The ideas presented in this paper challenge the ability of social media to actually promote the growth of a person's social skills. The deceitful nature of the Internet is examined, as well as the effectiveness of dating sites, how such interactions harm a person's social skills, and possible solutions for those who find themselves struggling with shyness or Internet addiction. The author recommends that action be taken and that people be educated about the threat that social media poses to social skills.

Social Media and Stunted Social Growth: The Effect of Social Media on Interaction

The ease at which social barriers come down over the Internet is startling. Topics that would be considered awkward or difficult to discuss in person are suddenly approachable from the comfort of one's home behind the shield of a screen. The shy and quiet people in real life are suddenly outspoken, forum social butterflies when they power on their laptop. Some may think that this is a positive aspect of social media, that the interaction allows the socially reclusive to make connections and express themselves where they would be too fearful to do so otherwise. This train of thought, while nice in theory, is far from the truth of the matter. While some may come out of their shell while online, when they leave the comfy web of cyberspace they return to their former selves, unable to communicate properly when face-to-face with another human being. Some may still argue further that this ability to function socially online is a better alternative to no interaction at all, and that a shy individual may be able to develop social skills through social media, but again this opinion is flawed.

Students may find themselves at a disadvantage during college admission or job interviews when they need to command attention and deliver a coherent message. At social gatherings and in personal relationships, they need to be able to effectively express themselves and connect with others.

(Lederer, 2012)

Social media does nothing to enhance the socially reclusive individual's interpersonal skills. While these individuals may appear to make progress online and form relationships, none of it is truly real. These social skills do not carry over into the real world, and the false nature of Internet personas serve to support the fact that the

relationships that people have online cannot compare to reality. Social media stunts the growth of face-to-face social skills through deceit, bodily disconnect, and the impersonal nature of social media itself.

Understanding the Target Audience

When on the subject of social media and shyness/social anxiety, it is important to understand the difference between shyness and introversion. A person who is shy desires social interaction, to be a part of the crowd and to be able to behave like an extravert. However, these people are unable to do so because they are held back by their own inhibitions and negative thoughts about themselves. The fear of humiliation, no matter how small, keeps a shy or socially anxious person from behaving how he or she would like to. Introverts are confident in social situations; they have no fear when it comes to interaction. “Rather than being averse to social engagement, introverts become overwhelmed by too much of it, which explains why the introvert is ready to leave a party after an hour and the extravert gains steam as the night goes on.” (Helgoe, 2010) Introverts actually prefer solitude to large gatherings, whereas a shy person wants to be social but is afraid to.

Some may claim that being shy is not a problem, and that there is nothing wrong with a person who is afraid to communicate properly. The answer to that is a mixture of truth and falsity. While it is certainly true that nothing is wrong with a shy person, the state of being shy or, further more, socially anxious, should be rectified for the person’s own health. People who consider themselves shy and exhibit traits of shyness are

generally lonely or unhappy. A study performed by Jonathan Cheek and Catherine Busch on the comparative loneliness of shy and un-shy students over the course of a semester revealed “In the present study, the shy students’ loneliness scores remained significantly higher than the un-shy students’ scores at the end of the semester – despite habituation.” (Cheek & Busch, 1981, p. 7) Those students who considered themselves shy at the start of the semester made little or almost no progress over the course of a whole semester, as opposed to those who considered themselves not shy.

In addition to the notions of loneliness, human society has not reached a point where a person can efficiently or healthily live online. A good example is the acquisition of a job. People still need to meet for interviews and interact face-to-face with their potential employers. If somebody could not function properly or to the best of their ability in-person, then said person would have difficulty landing a job in today’s marketplace. A study conducted by Green Job Interview showed that “the vast majority of respondents continue to rely heavily on in-person and telephonic interviews to meet job candidates.” (p. 4) These results came in at a ninety-eight percent usage of in-person interviews. Suffice to say, shyness is a condition that should be treated thoroughly to benefit a person afflicted by it.



(Jackson, Kristina. 2013. "An image that is increasingly common in today's society." *Socializing Teens*. Photograph. Retrieved from <http://assets2.bigthink.com>)

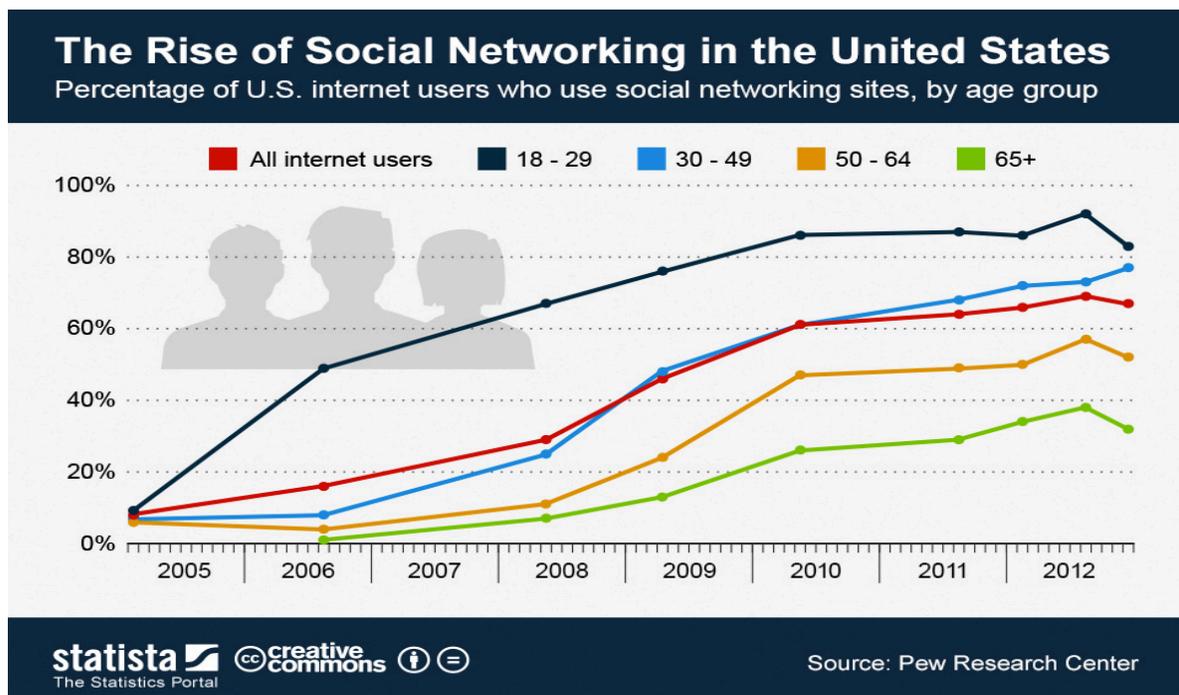
Social Media, Negative Reinforcement, and Deception

How does social media play in to shyness and why is it such a big problem?
Social media is a negative reinforcement in regards to behavior that is not characteristic of a person. When online, people become disconnected from who they really are and allow themselves to fall into personas that can be radically different from how they behave in real life.

The ideas of virtuality and simulation evoke the construction of a space of representation that can be related to 'as if' it were real and therefore effects a separation from, or even replacement of, the 'really real'. It therefore contrasts with several terms that characterize the offline world; 'real', 'actual', and 'material'. (Slader. p. 2)

The Internet, social media in particular, allows people to immerse themselves in something that is not real and treat it like it is real. This sets the basis for how an

individual will perceive social interaction, that is, impersonal and unreal despite any belief to the contrary. The more immersive the Internet becomes for an individual the less likely that said individual will have any desire for real life interaction, much less the strengthening of social skills. Most human beings are like water in that they follow the path of least resistance. A person could struggle with his or her inept social skills in real life, or (s)he could slip into the online world where (s)he believes (s)he can do anything socially that (s)he desires. This notion is incredibly damaging to one's potential to be social.



(Pew Research Center. 2012. "A graph showing the rise of social media in the United States, and with it the decline of social skills." *The Rise of Social Networking*. Graph. Retrieved from <https://d28wbuch0jlv7v.cloudfront.net>)

One key aspect of the problem with Internet reliance for social interaction is the, more often than not, deceptive nature of Internet users and the Internet itself. Studies have shown that a large amount of Internet users lie about themselves, and frequent users

lie more often, stating “22.5% lied about their age, while 27.5% lied about their physical appearance. 15% lied about their hobbies and 17.5% about their job and education.”

(Konecny, 2009) It is clearly evident that a large amount of users lie, and this has adverse consequences for the anxious or naïve user who interacts with these people. The user trusts these complete strangers, yet if it were to come out that the naïve user was being lied to it would crush that user’s notions about his or her online life, leading to emotional damage. Such a revelation could further hurt the user’s social skills in that a medium, which could potentially be utilized to expand the user’s in-person social skills, is suddenly untrustworthy. The damaging effects of betrayal include “shock, loss, distress, ruminative pre-occupation, self-doubting, lowered self-esteem and anger.” (Rachman, p. 3) These types of distress can only serve to further reduce a person’s ability to interact, as they will be reluctant to make more attempts at socializing afterwards.

It is not only strangers who deceive those they interact with. The typical shy Internet user is just as guilty of fakeness as any other web-browsing individual. People lie to better represent themselves, often because their real-life personage does not reflect how they want to be portrayed. “We want to look better, smarter, more capable, make a better impression than we believe our true character is capable of.” (Konecny) Because, if a user has no desire to take an online relationship to the in-person level, the anonymity of a screen allows one to change how one appears to another person. This does nothing for one’s social skills. Generally the user prefers their online persona to his or her real life one, shown by his or her usage of deceit when online. If a person prefers to be someone else socially, then (s)he will decay socially in reality, as (s)he will always desire a release

from real life. This is especially damaging because one cannot escape from reality completely, and they must live the majority of their life in the real world.

Not all people go online to lie, however. Despite the prevalence of deceit in the cyber world, some people go on the Internet to express who they truly are, or believe they are. “Some people find it hard to express their true self in the social environment of the real world, which could result in social anxiety. Interaction through the Internet can thus serve as a form of protection or manner for temporary reduction of this anxiety.”

(Konecny) The key phrase to note here is *temporary reduction*. Sooner or later an individual will have to leave cyber space, step out of his or her comfort zone and take in the real world, whether (s)he likes it or not. A temporary solution is just that, a solution with no long-term substance. A crutch is a temporary solution to a broken foot, but one does not use the crutch forever. Eventually it must be cast aside and the injured foot must be walked upon. A socially anxious person’s social skills are like this broken foot and the Internet is the crutch. This does not mean that the Internet facilitates the recovery of a person’s social skills; rather it can provide support, but only for a limited amount of time. Socially anxious people who rely on the Internet to either alter or express themselves are damaging their prospects for real life social growth.

A prime example of both the deceitful nature of online relationships and how they compare to real life is the area of Internet dating. First and foremost, online relationships can hardly be considered real. An intrinsic part of a relationship is to know someone, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Without all three components, a relationship can hardly be considered as such. Cyber interactions effectively eliminate the physical aspect

of knowing a person, and thus cannot truly be counted as real. Secondly, online dating is in no way more effective than offline dating.

To attract customers, online dating sites typically emphasize two aspects of the services they offer. First they emphasize that their services are unique to dating through the Internet; that is, the sites are offering a service that cannot be duplicated in any other way...Second, online dating sites emphasize that forming relationships using their services is superior to dating offline. (Finkel, 2012, p. 4)

The first assertion made by dating sites is somewhat true. Online dating is fundamentally different from offline dating in that it alters how and at what speed information is gathered about one's romantic interest. The process is too different from offline dating for it to be considered not unique. However, the second claim garners an interesting analysis, in that online dating is superior in some ways, but inferior where it counts.

The claim that online dating is superior to offline dating is skewed towards the negative in terms of what is important in a relationship. The positive aspects of online dating are

access to partners for people who otherwise might lack it...the ability to engage in brief computer mediated communication...Finally, matching algorithms may be effective at omitting from the dating pool people who are likely to be poor relationship partners in general. (Finkel, p. 48).

It is to be noted that these positive aspects only really apply to the meeting process of interacting with people, not the actual relationship itself. The negative aspects of online dating exhibit this fact. "Many aspects of online dating do not appear to improve

romantic outcomes and might even undermine them. For example, the widespread emphasis on profiles as the first introduction to potential partners seems unfortunate in light of the disconnect between what people find attractive in a profile versus what they find attractive when meeting another person face-to-face...In addition, browsing many profiles fosters judgmental, assessment-oriented evaluations and can cognitively overwhelm users, two processes that can ultimately undermine romantic outcomes.” (Finkel, p. 48) Despite the broad avenues for meeting people online, the actual outcome of a relationship is not improved in anyway through online dating and is, in fact, often undermined by mindsets that can develop from excessive use of dating sites. This correlates directly with the necessity for developed in-person social skills. A person can make claim to all the characteristics that (s)he wants online, and may even be able to exhibit them when online. However, when it comes to person-to-person interaction, if people cannot show who they are out of social anxiety then all of the prior build up was for naught.

Solutions

How are the Internet addicts and socially anxious to be helped? The primary solution is to help those afflicted with shyness and social anxiety. Shyness is an affliction, a negative and treatable trait that can and should be fixed. Shyness is only recently emerging as a medically treatable illness, with several proposed solutions coming to light. Medicines such as “monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAO-Is), phenelzine; betablockers such as atenolol; benzodiazepines such as clonazepam and alprazolam; and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors” (Scott, 2006, p. 6) are being prescribed to people with social anxiety and who are shy. However, as with most medicines these drugs are aimed

at eliminating symptoms while not necessarily treating the problem, said problem being the state of society. “This neglect of these social dimensions of the shy self reinforces the belief that this is a problem of individual minds rather than a reflection of social norms and values.” (Scott, p. 7) Medicine may not be the most ideal solution, but it can be a stepping-stone towards better resolutions.

Aside from medication, there are other proposed treatment methods for shyness. The more widespread and well-known methods are therapeutic in nature, and actually serve to treat shyness rather effectively. A particularly used method is cognitive-behavioral therapy, which focuses on eliminating the automatic negative thought processes that socially anxious people experience. Some sources go so far as to call these treatments miraculous. However, the therapeutic line is not a perfect system, particularly because it relies so heavily on the client’s ability to change.

The proponents of CBT emphasize that it is the client’s responsibility to do the mental and emotional work of changing. While they can provide the tools and encouragement needed to retrain the shy mind, they say, this can only be achieved if the individual is prepared to accept the authority of the therapists and obey their instructions. (Scott, p. 9)

Human beings are inherently resistant to change, and as such the reliance on the patient’s personal ability to change makes the process oftentimes difficult.

Social anxiety and shyness are a crippling state of being, and the growth of social media is serving to only stunt the ability of afflicted individuals to grow and overcome their anxiety. While social media can provide an outlet for people to express themselves and interact with others, it is a double-edged sword in that it also does nothing to promote

the growth of social skills outside of the virtual world. This is hazardous to a person's health because everyone has to face reality eventually. Job interviews are still conducted mainly in person, relationships are formed in person, and meaningful interactions are in person. The Internet can be a stepping-stone, or even an asset towards the improvement of social skills if handled correctly, but the core of the matter is that the shy need to get out there and learn how to function properly in society or get the treatment that they need in order to do so. Through the proper treatment and education, social media could be used in moderation in order to facilitate the growth of in-person social skills. It is critical that humanity does not progress to a purely online culture, as real and meaningful interaction will be lost forever.

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